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ABSTRACT

R. G. Brockett in two recent articles (1988, 1990) has proposed a model for helping adult educators think about their decision making relative to ethical issues. This model describes a process that allows adult educators to draw upon their basic values in making practice decisions. The model's three interrelated dimensions or levels of ethical practice are as follows: personal value system, consideration of multiple responsibilities, and operationalization of values. Whether they acknowledge them or not, adult educators encounter ethical dilemmas in their practice on a daily basis. Some common ethical dilemmas occur in teaching adults and in program planning. A teacher may encounter ethical dilemmas when his/her personal value system regarding the appropriate conduct of the learning situation conflicts with that of students and when other responsibilities conflict with teaching or are given a higher priority than the teaching role. Two areas of ethical dilemmas are encountered in program planning: those affiliated with needs, whether "felt" or "expressed" or whether unacknowledged by the learner; and those related to fee structures. Brockett (1990) suggests the following ideas for promoting ethical practice in adult education: examine oneself, reflect on ethics in practice, examine the practices of other professions, and encourage and support a research agenda on ethics. (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

DIGEST NO. 116

Ethical Practice in Adult Education

by Susan Imel

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Unlike other fields with a strong service orientation, adult education has only recently begun to consider the role of ethics and its relationship to practice. Adult educators continually make decisions and solve problems related to practice, but discussions about ethics have been impeded because of the field's diversity and the tendency to focus on its learner-centered nature rather than its practices (Brockett 1988b, Cervero 1989, Sork 1988b). In describing the importance of ethics to the field, Sork (1988b) suggests that "a consideration of the ethics of practice is inescapable if anything approaching a complete understanding of practice is ever to be achieved" (p. 393).

This **ERIC Digest** describes some of the ethical dilemmas that are inherent in the education of adults and provides ideas that should be helpful in decision making relative to ethical issues faced by adult educators. Following a discussion of the ethical dimensions of adult education practice, selected ethical dilemmas in teaching and program planning are described. The digest concludes with some suggestions for promoting ethical practice in adult education.

Ethical Dimensions of Adult Education Practice

By its nature, the practice of adult education is an endeavor in which "ethical choices are not some abstract ideal but are embedded in the very fabric of practice" (Cervero 1989, p. 110). Because ethics is the process of deciding what should be done, the choices adult educators continually make such as what individuals are to learn or how programs are to be developed reflect the ethical nature of their practice (Brown 1990, Cervero 1989).

Many practice situations are characterized by ambiguity and conflicting values, thereby preventing adult educators from applying standardized principles as solutions. Instead, educators begin to make choices that are based on their beliefs about the way things ought to be (Cervero 1989). However, these choices are frequently made without reflecting on the value judgments and assumptions that implicitly operate throughout the decision-making process (Brown 1990).

Brockett (1988a, 1990) has proposed a model for helping adult educators think about their decision making relative to ethical issues. Consisting of three interrelated dimensions or levels of ethical practice, the model describes a process that allows adult educators to draw upon their basic values in making practice decisions. Rather than providing prescriptive guidelines, the model helps people discover the best course of action for themselves, which is better than telling people what to do (Brown 1990).

The model's three dimensions are personal value system, consideration of multiple responsibilities, and operationalization of values. The first dimension--personal value system--helps adult educators answer the questions, "What do I believe and how committed am I to those beliefs?" This dimension reinforces the fact that ethical practice begins with an understanding of personal values (Brockett 1988a, 1990).

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Consideration of multiple responsibilities, the second dimension, revolves around the question, "To whom am I responsible as an adult educator?" Because of the nature of their work, adult educators are responsible to a number of parties, including learners, employers and employing organizations, professional colleagues, and society. This dimension helps them to consider the options or choices available in meeting what are frequently conflicting needs (ibid.).

The third dimension, operationalization of values, asks "How do I put my values into practice?" Although this dimension can involve the development of a formal code of ethics, the translation of values into practice in adult education has tended to be more informal. Brockett (1990, p. 9) says that a "way of putting values into practice is to identify basic moral principles that lie at the heart of one's practice," suggesting the following six principles to guide practice:

- **Respect**--Do I respect the learners with whom I work?
- **Justice**--Is there equity in service to learners?
- **Obligations to clients**--Are the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved shared and considered?
- **Beneficence**--Are harmful outcomes minimized and positive outcomes maximized?
- **Caring**--Do I really care about the learners with whom I work?
- **Self-awareness**--Am I able and willing to reflect on my own adult education practice?

Ethical Dilemmas in Adult Education Practice

Whether they acknowledge them or not, adult educators encounter ethical dilemmas in their practice on a daily basis. Some common ethical dilemmas that occur in teaching adults and in program planning are described and discussed in this section.

Ethical Dilemmas in Teaching

Caffarella (1988), who suggests that ethical dilemmas are an inevitable part of teaching adults, examines them in terms of Brockett's model. The first dimension, personal value system, affects how individuals teach, what they teach, and how they interact with their students. Teachers' personal value systems will influence whether they emphasize learners' strengths or inadequacies; whether they treat students equally regardless of race, gender, ethnic origin, or creed; and whether they believe adults can learn regardless of age, social class, and previous learning experiences.

A teacher may encounter an ethical dilemma when his/her personal value system regarding the appropriate conduct of the learning situation conflicts with that of students. For example, teachers who have a humanistic view of people usually perceive their teaching role to be that of facilitator, tend to be more student directed in their teaching, and think of themselves as catalysts in the learning process. However, some students may resent this approach and expect the teacher to use lectures and tests rather than develop their skills as self-directed learners

(Caffarella 1988). The teacher faced with this dilemma must decide whether to abandon, modify, or stay on course with the approach that is consistent with his/her personal view of human nature.

In terms of the second dimension, consideration of multiple responsibilities, Caffarella points out that teaching adults is seldom a full-time occupation. Ethical dilemmas may occur when other responsibilities conflict with teaching or are given a higher priority than the teaching role. Individuals whose teaching role is secondary to other responsibilities may need to examine their motives for teaching adults as well as whether they can take time from their major roles to prepare adequately for teaching.

In discussing how teachers operationalize their values in the practice of their craft, Caffarella addresses the third dimension of Brockett's model. In addition to discussing dilemmas that arise from personal value systems and multiple responsibilities, she suggests that teachers also need to model ethical behavior in teaching. According to Caffarella, this practice "requires all participants in the learning activity, teachers and students alike, to be willing to question what is being taught and how the subject matter is being addressed" (p. 114). An important part of this process is considering the ethical questions affiliated with the subject matter under discussion.

Ethical Dilemmas in Program Planning

Program planning in adult education is a complicated, multistep process requiring numerous decisions at many points. Like that of teachers, decision making by program planners is influenced not only by their own value systems but also by their responsibilities to multiple audiences who may have differing expectations for program development processes and outcomes. Sork (1988a) points out that "ethical issues arise in program planning when any of the alternatives under consideration are associated with value positions that may be viewed as unacceptable by society, other practitioners, clients, sponsors, or planners themselves" (p. 34).

Two areas of ethical dilemmas encountered in program planning described by Sork (ibid.) are the following:

- **Those affiliated with needs**. Two areas of dilemmas associated with needs include (1) responding to "felt" or "expressed" needs and (2) basing a program on needs unacknowledged by the adult learner. In the first, the autonomy of the learner is taken into consideration, but the planner may have to make a decision about which of many needs it is feasible to address or may be confronted with expressed needs that are potentially harmful. In the second, the planner may be faced with violating the autonomy of the learner while addressing the needs of some other entity such as employers or society.
- **Those related to fee structures**. Because decisions about pricing and fees have a bearing on a learner's ability and willingness to pay for educational programs, they are ethically significant. For example, a programmer may be faced with making a price decision that will eliminate many who might benefit most from programs because they are often those who can afford it the least. Yet, if a programmer employs the "Robin Hood principle," in which he/she charges more for programs designed for those who can afford it in order to subsidize programs for those less able to pay, is that ethically defensible?

Promoting Ethical Practice in Adult Education

Clearly, ethics are an integral part of adult education practice, but adult educators need to develop a greater awareness and sensitivity to ethical issues. Brockett (1990) suggests the following ideas for promoting ethical practice in adult education:

- **Self-examination**. The starting point for understanding the ethics of practice is found in personal value systems but these must be articulated. Writing down and reflecting on one's personal philosophy of adult education is a helpful process for helping clarify personal beliefs.
- **Reflect on ethics in practice.** Finding time for personal and group reflection on ethical issues is important because it helps uncover ethical dilemmas and resolve conflicts before they arise.
- **Examine the practices of other professions**. Learning how other professions deal with ethical dilemmas can lead to more insights about the ethics of adult education practice. Although this approach may be helpful, Brockett warns against uncritical adoption of practices that are incompatible with adult education's philosophical approaches.
- **Encourage and support a research agenda on ethics**. Research can lead to greater understanding of ethical issues in adult education and provide information that will help adult educators respond to them.

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